



THE YOUNGER SET



ingly sensitive about it, so she merely guessed what reply her child expected: "It's all settled, dear. Captain Selwyn arrived a moment ago." And she closed the file.

It was already too late anyhow, and presently, turning to see who was seated on his left, Selwyn found himself gazing into the calm, flushed face of Alize Ruthven. It was their third encounter.

They exchanged a dazed nod of recognition, a meaningless murmur, and turned again, apparently undisturbed, to their respective dinner parties.

A great many curious eyes lingering on them shifted elsewhere in reluctant disappointment.

As for the hostess, she had for one instant come as near to passing backward as she could without doing it when she discovered the situation. Then she accepted it with true humor. She could afford to. But her daughters, Sheila and Dorothy, suffered acutely, being of this year's output and martyrs to responsibility.

Meanwhile Selwyn, grimly aware of an accident somewhere and perfectly conscious of the feelings which must by this time dominate his hostess, was wondering how best to avoid anything that might resemble a situation.

Instead of two or three dozen small tables scattered among the palms of the winter garden their hostess had preferred to construct a great oval board around the aquarium. The ar-

gument made it a little easier for Selwyn and Mrs. Ruthven. He talked to his dinner partner until she began to respond in monosyllables, which closed each subject that he opened and wearied him as much as he was boring her. But Bradley Harmon, the man on her right, evidently had better fortune, and presently Selwyn found himself with nobody to talk to, which came as near to embarrassing him as anything could and which so enraged his hostess that she struck his partner's name from her lists forever. People were already glancing at him askance in sly amusement or cold curiosity.

Then he did a thing which endeared him to Mrs. T. West Minister and to her two disconsolate children.

"Mrs. Ruthven," he said very naturally and pleasantly, "I think perhaps we had better talk for a moment or two if you don't mind. My dinner partner is quite impossible, you see, and I happen to be here as a filler in—commanded to the presence only a few minutes ago. It's a pardonable error. I bear no malice. But I'm sorry for you."

There was a silence. Alize straightened her slim figure and turned, but young Inuis, who had taken her in, had become confidential with Mrs. Fane. As for Selwyn's partner, she probably divined his conversational designs on her, but she merely turned her bare shoulder a trifle more unmistakably and continued her gossip with Bradley Harmon.

Alize broke a tiny morsel from her bread, sensible of the tension.

"I suppose," she said as though reciting to some new acquaintance an amusing bit of gossip, "that we are destined to this sort of thing occasionally and had better get used to it."

"I suppose so."

"Please," she added after a pause, "aid me a little."

"I will if I can. What am I to say?"

"Have you nothing to say?" she asked, smiling. "It need not be very evil, you know, as long as nobody hears you."

To school his features for the deception of others, to school his voice and manner and at the same time look smilingly into the grave of his youth and hope called for the sort of self command foreign to his character. Glancing at him under her smoothly fitted mask of amiability, she slowly grew afraid of the situation, but not of her ability to sustain her own part.

They exchanged a few meaningless phrases; then she resolutely took young Inuis away from Rosamund Fane, leaving Selwyn to count the bubbles in his wineglass.

But in a few moments, whether by accident or deliberate design, Rosamund interfered again, and Mrs. Ruthven was confronted with the choice of a squabble for possession of young Inuis, of conspicuous silence or of resuming once more with Selwyn, and she chose the last resort.

"You are living in town?" she asked pleasantly.

"Yes."

"Of course; I forgot. I met a man last night who said you had entered the firm of Neergard & Co."

"I have. Who was the man?"

"You can never guess, Captain Sel-

ing to ask you if I may. Shall I?"

He smiled cordially, and she laughed as though confiding a delightful bit of news to him.

"Do you regard me as sufficiently important to dislike me?"

"I do not—dislike you?"

"Is it stronger than dislike, Phil?"

"Yes."

"Contempt?"

"No."

"What is it?"

"It is that—I have not yet—become—reconciled."

"To my—folly?"

"To mine."

She strove to laugh lightly and, failing, raised her glass to her lips again.

"Now you know," he said, pitching his tones still lower. "I am glad, after all, that we have had this plain understanding. I have never felt unkindly toward you. I can't. What you did I might have prevented had I known enough, but I cannot help it now, nor can you if you would."

"If I would," she repeated gayly, for the people opposite were staring.

"We are done for," he said, nodding carelessly to a servant to refill his glass, "and I abide by conditions because I chose to, not," he added contemptuously, "because a complacent law has tethered you to—the thing that has crawled up on your knees to have its ears rubbed."

The level insult to her husband stunned her. She sat there, upright, the white smile stamped on her stiffened lips, fingers tightening about the stem of her wineglass.

He began to toss bread crumbs to the scarlet fish, laughing to himself in an ugly way. "Why, Alize, only look at him! Look at his gold wristlets; listen to his snigger, his lip. Little girl—oh, little girl, what have you done to yourself, for you have done nothing to me, child, that can match it in sheer atrocity?"

Her color was long in returning.

"Philip," she said unsteadily, "I don't think I can stand this—"

"Yes, you can."

"I am too close to the wall, I—"

"Talk to Scott Inuis. Take him away from Rosamund Fane; that will fide you over. Or feed those fool fish; like this! Look how they rush and flap and spatter! That's amusing, isn't it—for people with the intellects of canaries? Will you please try to say something? Mrs. T. West is exhibiting the restless symptoms of a hen turkey at sundown, and we'll all go to roost in another minute. Don't shiver that way!"

"I can't control it. I will in a moment. Give me a chance. Talk to me, Phil."

"Certainly. The season has been unusually gay and the opera most stuporously brilliant. Stocks continue to fluctuate. Another old woman was tossed and gored by a mad motor this morning. More time, Alize? With pleasure. Mrs. Vendening has bought a third rate castle in Wales. A man was found dead with a copy of the Tribune in his pocket, the verdict being in accordance with fact. The Panama canal—"

But it was over at last—a flurry of sweeping skirts, ranks of black and white in escort to the passage of the fluttering silken procession.

"Goodby," she said. "I am not staying for the dance."

"Goodby," he said pleasantly. "I wish you better fortune for the future. I'm sorry I was rough."

He was not staying either. A dull excitement possessed him resembling suspense, as though he were awaiting a denouement, as though there was yet some crisis to come.

After awhile he found himself in the ballroom.

The younger set was arriving. He recognized several youthful people, friends of Eileen Erroll, and, taking his bearings among these bright, fresh faces, amid this animated throng, constantly increased by the arrival of others, he started to find the hostess, now lost to sight in the breezy circle of silk and lace setting in from the stairs.

He heard names announced which meant nothing to him, which stirred no memory, names which sounded vaguely familiar, names which caused him to turn quickly, but seldom were the faces as familiar as the names.

He said to a girl behind whose chair he was standing: "All the younger brothers and sisters are coming here to confound me. I hear a Miss Inuis announced, but it turns out to be her younger sister."

"By the way, do you know my name?" she asked.

"No," he said frankly. "Do you know mine?"

"Of course I do. I listened breathlessly when somebody presented you wholesale at your sister's the other day. I'm Rosamund Fane. You might as well be instructed because you're to take me in at the Orchills' next Thursday night, I believe."

Looking up at a chubby young man who had halted near her, she said, "George, this is Captain Selwyn." Glancing at Selwyn: "Have you met my husband? Oh, of course!"

They exchanged a commonplace or two; then other people separated them without resistance on their part, and Selwyn found himself drifting mildly interested in the rapid exchange of

civilities which cost nobody a mental effort.

His sister, he had once thought, was certainly the most delightfully youthful matron in New York. But now he made an exception of Mrs. Fane. Rosamund Fane was much younger—must have been younger, for she still had something of that volatile freshness, that vague atmosphere of immaturity clinging to her like a perfume almost too delicate to detect, and under that the most profound capacity for mischief he had ever known of. Sauntering amiably amid the glittering groups continually forming and disintegrating under the clustered lights, he finally succeeded in reaching his hostess.

And Mrs. T. West Minister disengaged herself from the throng with intention as he approached.

No. And he was so sorry, and it was very amiable of his hostess to want him, but he was not remaining for the dance.

So much for the hostess, who stood there massive and gem laden, her kindly and painted features tinted now with genuine emotion.

"Can you forgive a very much mortified old lady who is really and truly fond of you?" she said.

He laughed, holding her fat, ringed hands in both of his with all the attractive deference that explained his popularity. Rising excitement had sent the color into his face and cleared his pleasant gray eyes, and he looked very young and handsome, his broad shoulders bent a trifle before the enameled and bejeweled matron.

"Forgive, you?" he repeated, with a laugh of protest. "On the contrary, I thank you."

Mrs. Ruthven is one of the most charming women I know, if that is what you mean."

Looking after him as he made his way toward the cloakroom, "The boy is thoroughbred," she reflected cynically, "and the only amusement anybody can get out of it will be at my expense! Rosamund is a perfect cat!"

He had sent for his cab, which, no doubt, was in line somewhere, wedged among the ranks of carriages stretching east and west along the snowy street, and he stood on the thick crimson carpet under the awning while it was being summoned. The Cornelius Suydam, emerging from the house, offered Selwyn tommorow room, but he smilingly declined, having a mind for solitude and the Lenox club. A platoon of debutantes, opera bound, also left. Then the tide set heavily the other way, and there seemed no end to the line of arriving vehicles and guests until he heard a name pronounced. A policeman warned back an approaching motor, and Selwyn saw Mrs. Ruthven, enveloped in white furs, step from the portal.

She saw him as he moved back, nodded, passed directly to her brougham and set foot on the step. Pausing here, she looked about her right and left, then over her shoulder straight back at Selwyn, and as she stood in silence, evidently awaiting him, it became impossible for him any longer to misunderstand without a public affront to her.

When he started toward her she spoke to her maid, and the latter moved aside, with a word to the groom to wait.

"My maid will dismount your carriage," she said pleasantly when he halted beside her. "There is one thing more which I must say to you."

Was this what he had expected hazard might bring to him? Was this the prophecy of his hammering pulses?

"Please hurry before people come out," she added and entered the brougham.

"I can't do this," he muttered.

"I've sent away my maid," she said. "Nobody has noticed. Those are servants out there. Will you please come before anybody arriving or departing does notice?"

And as he did not move, "Are you going to make me conspicuous by this humiliation before servants?"

He said something between his set teeth and entered the brougham.

"Do you know what you've done?" he demanded harshly.

"Yes; nothing yet. But you would have done enough to stir this borough if you had delayed another second."

"Your maid saw—"

"My maid is my maid."

He leaned back in his corner, gray eyes narrowing.

"Naturally," he said, "you are the one to be considered, not the man in the case."

"Thank you. Are you the man in the

case?"

"There is no case," he said coolly.

"Then why worry about me?"

He folded his arms sullenly at bay, yet had no premonition of what to expect from her.

"You were very brutal to me," she said at length.

"I know it, and I did not intend to be. The words came."

"You had me at your mercy and showed me little—a very little at first, afterward none."

"The words came," he repeated. "I'm sick with self contempt. I tell you."

She set her white gloved elbow on the window sill and rested her chin in her palm.

"That money," she said, with an effort. "You set some aside for me?"

"Half," he nodded calmly.

"Why?"

He was silent.

"Why? I did not ask for it. There was nothing in the legal proceedings to lead you to believe that I desired it, was there?"

"No."

"Well, then—her breath came unsteadily—"what was there in me to make you think I would accept it?"

He did not reply.

"Answer me. This is the time to answer me."

"The answer is simple enough," he said in a low voice. "Together we had made a failure of partnership. When that partnership was dissolved there remained the joint capital to be divided. And I divided it. Why not?"

"That capital was yours in the beginning, not mine. What I had of my own you never controlled, and I took it with me when I went."

"It was very little," he said.

"What of that? Did that concern you? Did you think I would have accepted anything from you? A thousand times I have been on the point of notifying you through attorney that the deposit now standing in my name is at your disposal."

"Why didn't you notify me then?" he asked, reddening to the temples.

"Because I did not wish to hurt you by doing it that way. And I had not the courage to say it kindly over my own signature. That is why, Captain Selwyn."

And as he remained silent: "That is what I had to say; not all, because I wish to—thank you for offering it. You did not have very much either, and you divided what you had. So I thank you, and I return it." The tension forced her to attempt a laugh. "So we stand once more on equal terms unless you have anything of mine to return."

"I have your photograph," he said.

The silence lasted until he straightened up and, rubbing the fog from the window glass, looked out.

"We are in the park," he remarked, turning toward her.

"Yes. I did not know how long it might take to explain matters. You are free of me now whenever you wish."

He picked up the telephone—hesitated. "Home?" he inquired with an effort. And at the forgotten word they looked at one another in stricken silence.

"Yes; to your home first if you will let me drop you there."

"Thank you. That might be imprudent."

"No, I think not. You say you are living with the Gerards?"

"Yes, temporarily, but I've already taken another place."

"Where?"

"Oh, it's only a bachelor's kennel, a couple of rooms."

"Where, please?"

"Near Lexington and Sixty-sixth. I could go there. It's only partly furnished yet."

"Then tell Hudson to drive there."

"Thank you, but it is not necessary."

"Please let me. Tell Hudson or I will."

"You are very kind," he said and gave the order.

"May I ask my question?" she said.

"Ask it, child."

"Then are you happy?"

He did not answer.

"Because I desire it, Philip. I want you to be. You will be, won't you? I did not dream that I was ruining your army career when I—went mad."

"How did it happen, Alize?" he asked, with a cold curiosity that chilled her. "How did it come about, wretched as we seemed to be together, unhappy, incapable of understanding each other?"

"Phil! There were days—"

He raised his eyes.

"You speak only of the unhappy ones," she said. "But there were moments—"

"Yes, I know it, and so I ask you why?"

"Phil, I don't know. There was that last bitter quarrel—the night you left for Leyte after the dance. I—it all grew suddenly intolerable. You seemed so horribly unreal—everything seemed unreal in that ghastly city—you, I, our marriage of crazy impulse—the people, the sunlight, the deathly odors, the torturing, endless creak of the punka. It was not a question of—of love, of anger, of hate. I tell you I was stunned—I had no emotions con-

cerning you or myself—after that last scene—only a stupefied, blind necessity to get away, a groping instinct to move toward home—to make my way home and be rid forever of the dream that drugged me! And then—and then—"

"He came," said Selwyn very quietly. "Go on."

But she had nothing more to say.

"Alize!"

She shook her head, closing her eyes.

"Little girl—oh, little girl," he said softly, the old familiar phrase finding its way to his lips—and she trembled slightly. "Was there no other way but that? Had marriage made the world such a living hell for you that there was no other way but that?"

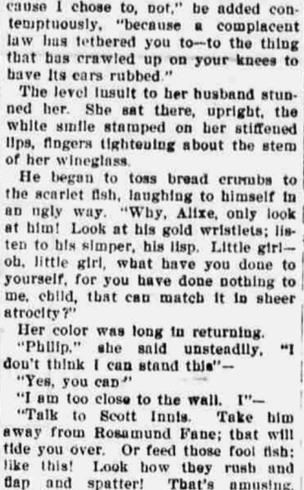
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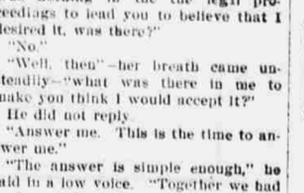
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